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CHOOSING A TRANSNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAM: WHAT DO VIETNAMESE STUDENTS RATE AS IMPORTANT?

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Abstract

Given the impact of globalisation on education, there is an increase in transnational education (TNE) programs in some Asian countries. While much literature in TNE has been on issues of quality assurance, culture and teaching and learning from the providers' perspectives, there is little discussion concerning students' perspectives. This paper provides some understanding of what Vietnamese transnational students rate as important when choosing to study these courses. Data collected from a survey of 333 Vietnamese undergraduate students attending Western-imported programs in Hanoi, Vietnam, and follow-up interviews with ten randomly selected participants, indicate that students are motivated to engage with the TNE programs mainly for international qualifications and English proficiency. The factors affecting their choice predominantly stem from the influence of their parents and the reputation of the awarding university's education systems. This paper highlights the need for incorporating students' perspectives into the provision of transnational programs. It will provide insights for educators and marketers who recruit students to educational contexts similar to that of Vietnam and provide useful information for the evaluation of the current TNE Advanced Programs in Vietnam.
Key words: transnational education, Vietnamese higher education, higher education.

Introduction

Transnational education (TNE) is a growing phenomenon in higher education internationalisation (Milana, 2012). The term "transnational education" is used to refer to "situations where the teachers, students, programs or institutions/ providers of course materials cross national jurisdictional borders" (OECD, 2004, p. 17). Whereas the term " transnational education (TNE) programs", refers to "any type of higher education program and service in which the learners are located in a country other than the one where the awarding institution is based" (Sutrisno & Pillay, 2013). In some Asian countries, these TNE programs sometimes are given such special names as "the Advanced Programs" in Vietnam (MOET, 2008), or Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (CFCRS) in China (Ong & Chan, 2012). In this transnational education process, many Western-origin transnational education programs have been introduced into the imported universities' contexts (Knight, 2010; Smith, 2010). Local students have been provided with more opportunities to receive TNE programs from online courses, internet-based distance learning, and off-campus delivery, without travelling out of their home countries (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2013). Consequently, there has been a significant growth in research on these TNE programs from differing perspectives: exporting educators, importing educators and providers, and local students. However, there is little discussion on the reasons students choose to study transnational programs instead of other options. This paper contributes to the research in this field and reports on student's reasons for enrolling in TNE programs in Vietnam, from the students' perspective. This paper addresses the research question: What are the reasons influencing students in choosing transnational educational programs?

Transnational education in Vietnam

Although the number of TNE programs operating in Vietnam is relatively low compared to its immediate neighbours such as China, Singapore and Malaysia (Altbach & Knight, 2007), the number of TNE programs in Vietnam has been increasing as a result of changes to recent regulations

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concerning transnational programs enacted by the Vietnamese government (Huang, 2007). The TNE programs in Vietnam are considered an Import-Oriented Type (Huang, 2007) as complete educational programs are imported from Western-developed educational institutions of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Altbach & Knight, 2010; Huang, 2007).

Currently, there are two very popular models of TNE programs in Vietnam. The first model is seen as the Western- offshore campuses or branch campuses located in Vietnam (e.g. RMIT-Vietnam, Latrobe-Vietnam). These campuses are built and equipped with modern teaching and learning facilities by Western institutions in local cities. In these programs, local Vietnamese students learn with Western-imported curriculum, textbooks in English language, and are granted internationally-recognised degrees by Western institutions. In both appearance and quality, these degrees are similar to those granted in Western countries. The second model of TNE program is the franchised or joint-degree programs. Typically, Vietnamese students enrolled in these joint-degree programs initially study for two or three years in Vietnam and then either transfer to Western universities for the remaining two years to complete their studies overseas for Western qualifications, or continue their two years of study in Vietnam for Vietnamese qualifications. One benefit of these franchise programs over the off-campus programs is lower tuition fees and study-related fees that local Vietnamese students have to pay for.

In 2006, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) announced a transnational education project named "Training the English- medium Advanced Programs in some selected Vietnamese institutions, period 2008-2015" which aims to improve the quality of domestic education to an international level and to increase national capacity for higher education, (MOET, 2008). In 2008 nine state universities were selected to cooperate with their highly-ranked educational partners in America and the United Kingdom to run their first 10 TNE programs in the Vietnamese context. MOET controls the entry and outcomes of these TNE programs regularly. By 2013, there was a total of 35 TNE programs under MOET's regulation operating national-wide in Vietnam

As noted earlier, the TNE programs are a new trend in educational internationalisation in Vietnam and in Asian nations, and subsequently many issues emerging from the implementation of these programs are the subject of both debate and research. However, most of the recent research has been from the perspectives of government, educational policy makers or educators (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Chiang, 2012; Daquila & Huang, 2013; Morshidi et al., 2011; Ong & Chan, 2012; Yang & Hsiao, 2006) and there has been little research from the students' experiences, the primary recipients of these TNE programs. Therefore, this study aims to fill this research gap as it is important to incorporate students' perspectives and experiences about the programs (Chapman, 2013; Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2012). Exploring students' reasons for choosing these TNE programs may provide stakeholders with greater understanding of the TNE programs in the Vietnamese context, and useful information for the evaluation of the current Advanced Programs in Vietnam.

Why students choose TNE programs?

According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), a person's behaviour of a particular event is influenced by the environment and their beliefs. In relation to this, students' behaviour of studying at a particular institution is influenced by their perceptions (of studying abroad or transnational education programs, and of a particular institution) and the environment (their background and their current conditions). In the following sections the literature will be reviewed to highlight students' reasons for studying transnational education.

Researchers have identified that a great number of students going abroad for higher education are influenced by push-pull factors (Mazarol & Soutal, 2002). There are a number of attractions in studying abroad that motivate students such as the desire to learn a language, self-development, a desire to learn about culture, people, a host country. These are considered as "pull factors". In other words, pull factors are those that make another country/destination more attractive than the student's home country. In addition, there may be factors or reasons such as their home country's environment, the quality of the home country's education system, or the requirement of their jobs that push them to go abroad to study. They are called "push factors". This push/pull-factors framework by Mazarol and Soutal (2002) will be utilised as a conceptual framework for the current project to understand why Vietnamese students select TNE programs instead of going abroad to study or enrolling in a

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Vietnamese university which offers the same major or courses.

Previous researchers (Chapman & Pyvis, 2007; Ziguras, 2008, Hoare, 2012) have identified some common reasons influencing students when selecting TNE programs. For example, Ziguras (2008) explored Chinese students' perspective about the reasons why they study a transnational degree. They found that the main reasons for studying these programs included accessing an international qualification, credit transfer for previous study, or because the host country does not offer that type of program. In another study with Malaysian students, Chapman and Pyvis (2007) found that the Malaysian students "typically valued an international education as a passport to employment, usually with multinational corporations operating in Malaysia" (p. 38). Meanwhile, Singaporean students decided to study TNE programs to achieve high-level positional career opportunities (Hoare, 2012). It is noteworthy that both "transnational and international students deliberately choose to enrol in an offshore or international institution, rather than a local university, because they think they will receive better quality education" (Egege & Kutieleh, 2008, p. 74). Consequently, they expect to learn new things, and they expect significant differences in their target TNE programs while local programs cannot provide them sufficiently. Therefore, it can be said that these Asian student are influenced by push factors suggested by Mazarol and Soutal (2002)

In Vietnam, students who desire Western degrees because of the international status of the awarding institutions and language competence improvement can attend TNE programs under the government-owned project (MOET, 2008). The emerging issue of whether Vietnamese students may have similar reasons for choosing TNE programs as their Asian peers or not has not been studied much by researchers and scholars. Therefore, this paper aims to address the question: *What are the reasons influencing Vietnamese students in choosing the TNE programs in Vietnam?*

Methods

This study aimed at exploring Vietnamese undergraduate students' reasons and expectations for their choice of TNE programs delivered in local Vietnamese educational institutions. The main study, which followed a previous pilot study, involved a questionnaire survey of 333 undergraduate students in four TNE programs, including Accounting (55); Crop Science (88); Finance (111) and IBA (79) at three large state universities currently hosting several TNE programs in Hanoi. Ninety-seven students were males and 236 females and they were in their second and third year of study in the TNE programs. Follow-up individual interviews were conducted with ten randomly selected students who had already voluntarily participated in the survey and registered to continue the research.

At first, the questionnaire was administered during the students' classes using group distribution. This questionnaire consisted of two main sections. Section 1 included some questions about the participant's background including gender, study major, university and duration of English study up to the time of the questionnaire. Section two consisted of 20 items focusing on why the students chose the TNE programs and what expectations they had during and after their courses. This 20-item scale, addressed as "*the REA scale*", was designed and developed by the author of this study for Vietnamese participants studying in these particular TNE programs. Items on the REA scale were rated using a 5-point Likert type format ranging from (1) "*never or almost never true of me*" through to (5) "*always or almost always true of me*". Students could complete the questionnaire either in English or Vietnamese, whichever they felt more confident with. The aims of the survey and general instructions for completing the survey were explained by the researcher in advance. This was an anonymous survey, so that students would not be recognised in any cases. The questionnaire survey was conducted by the researcher in three target Vietnamese institutions currently running TNE programs from June to September, 2013.

In terms of statistical analysis, this 20-item REA scale was subjected to Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) because this was the first time *the REA scale* had been implemented in a sample. The EFA aimed to explore the underlying latent structures of the newly developed scale (Kline, 1994). Also, this was the first time this scale had been used in a Vietnamese educational context. *Factor* version 9.2 (Lorenzo-Seva & Ferrando, 2006) and *IBM SPSS Statistics* version 21 (IBMCorp., 2012) were used to conduct the EFA of this scale. Parallel Analysis (PA) of the polychromic correlation matrix using the minimum rank factor analysis (MRFA) was selected to determine the number of retainable factors and to measure the dimensionality of this scale. From the EFA report it was

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suggested that the item REA_03 should be removed from this *REA scale* due to its very small factor loading (at 0.173). The one-factor model named the *instrumental orientation reason* was rerun with 19 items using SPSS 21 to test the reliability of the scale. The Cronbach alpha (α =. 86) indicated high internal consistency of the scale. Moreover, the construct validity of the content of the survey questionnaire was reviewed by two native English speaking lecturers and two Vietnamese instructors of English language.

Descriptive analysis including means, standard deviations, and percentage distribution by points on the Likert scale, were used to summarize responses of research participants on the REA scale. Specifically, the means of the REA-scale items ranged from 3.29 to 4.30, in which the means of higher than 3.7 were considered as high means, while the means valued from 3.5 to 3.7 were regarded as medium means; and the means of lower than 3.5 were ranked as low means. The composite mean of the REA scale was 3.65 (SD=.53, N= 333), which expressed a quite high frequency of participants' choice to the REA items. It can be said that more participants selected the number 4 *(usually true of me)* and 5 *(always true of me)* in the 5-point Likert REA scale. To clarify the strongest and weakest reasons for studying the current TNE courses, the six items with the high means (top 30%) and the six with the low means (bottom 30%) on the REA scale were identified.

Individual follow-up interviews were conducted with ten randomly selected students which helped provide deeper understanding of the quantitative data. It is important to note that to enable the participants to express their views easily the researcher invited them to choose the language they would like to use in the interviews. All participants decided to communicate in Vietnamese. Also, the questions in the semi-structured interviews were transcribed and translated by the researcher using the translation process (Sutrisno, Nguyen & Tangen, 2013). In the transcription of the interviews, these students were coded in alphabet letters (e.g. St A, St B,).

Findings

Data from the survey show that the students generally chose the western-degree courses because of the international status of the awarding institution. Two of the most important reasons for choosing the course were that they believed that their English language competence could be improved, and to gain a world-recognised degree. For example, data from the survey indicate that the three strongest reasons for studying such TNE programs were either to get both Western qualifications and English proficiency after the course *(item 05; M=4.3)*; or to pursue higher education overseas *(item 02; M=3.8)* or to improve their social status with English competence *(item 08; M=3.86)*. These were followed by the reasons for improving English proficiency *(item 10, M=3.78 & item 12, M= 3.73)* or studying with Western professors *(item 14, M=3.78* (see table 1)*.

Table 1. *Strongest reasons for studying the TNE courses*

REA Items	Mean	Item description
REA_05	4.309	*I would like to get good qualifications and English competence after graduation.*
REA_08	3.865	*Being able to speak English fluently will lift my social status.*
REA_02	3.802	*I would prefer to study further overseas for MA or Doctor degrees*
REA_14	3.784	*I really like to learn with Western professors in these programs.*
REA_10	3.781	*I can improve English so that I can understand English-speaking social media like Western films, videos, TV or radio.*
REA_12	3.739	*English will help me to know various cultures and peoples in the world*

By contrast, the three weakest reasons reported by participants include degrees and knowledge that they can obtain from the courses and their favourite subjects being delivered in such courses. Table 2 summarises the six REA items (equivalent to about 30% of the 19 items) with the lowest means. The participants did not select the reasons for showing interest in student-centred teaching methods and new methods of assessments in these Western courses.

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Table 2. *The Weakest reasons for studying the TNE courses*

REA Items	Mean	Item description
REA_06	3.495	*Western qualification will be better for my future employment promotion than another Vietnamese one.*
REA_20	3.474	*I prefer different methods of assessment made by these course lecturers. They ask us as students to keep on learning and improving knowledge and experience in our disciplines, which are valuable for our future profession.*
REA_18	3.45	*I am interested in newly student-centred teaching methods in these courses. Students' viewpoints are encouraged and considered by teachers and other friends.*
REA_16	3.423	*I think the knowledge I have obtained in these classes is useful for my current study and future career.*
REA_15	3.357	*I like to learn with my favourite subjects of these courses.*
REA_04	3.294	*I learn the Advanced Programs (APs) to be able to get two degrees after graduation as advertised (Western degree and Vietnamese degree).*

Data from the interviews confirm the findings from the survey, which indicate that the students rated getting both Western qualification and English proficiency or improving their English competence as the most important reasons for enrolling in TNE programs. Other reasons identified from interview data included 'to learn with Western professors' and to have more opportunity for further study abroad. For example, student C said: "Western professors have different concepts and their teaching methods are quite different from other local ones" or "I love most of Western professors/ teachers as they deliver lecturers interestingly, their viewpoints were expressed attractively and their combination of different teaching methods are more logical and explicit and more professional than local Vietnamese ones. I love these" (St D).

It is noteworthy that these interviewed participants gave other reasons relating to their choice of these TNE programs. For instance, some interviewees stated that their decisions were either determined by their parents (St D, St F and St I), or initiated by their friends' suggestions (St J), or even from the well-known name of the programs (St H) rather than their own investigation of the TNE program (St E).

Discussion

In the current study, the students' views about the reasons for their choice include the reputation of the awarding universities or "better quality" of providers' education and opportunities for English language competence. This finding concurs with previous research in TNE literature that most transitional and international students pursue international programs because of the reputation of the exported Western countries. This may be due to the impact of globalisation where international degrees can help graduates look for better jobs in a wider market, especially in developing Asian countries. These are considered as push-factor motivation for Asian students. This notion explains the dramatic growth of international and TNE programs in Vietnam in particular and in Asia in general in recent years

However, the significant finding of this study is that Vietnamese students also have had pull-factor motives (e.g. English language competence, enjoyment of study with foreign professors, new teaching methods) in their target TNE programs. For instance, one of the Vietnamese students' major reasons for choosing to study transnationally is to advance their English language competence for international qualifications. The students may have expected a learning environment where English was used as they realised that English, known as the most popular international language, can be the vital key to their future success in employment and social life. The interview data suggests that the current programs did not have as much impact as students had expected. Specifically, while most of interviewed students were really motivated and excited about attending lectures with Western professors during their learning period, but in reality, the number of credits or subjects instructed by Western teachers/ professors was very limited. This may partly explain the decline in the number of

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students attending or continuing the target TNE programs in Vietnamese educational Institutions recently and in the three universities involved in the study over the past two years (Pham, 2012).

One more reason participants chose to study in the TNE courses was they enjoyed the new teaching methods in which their voices were encouraged and supported. Also, in almost all subjects, they had the opportunity to discuss confusing issues with teachers, other classmates and make presentations about what they had mastered. In their opinion, these learning and teaching methods were completely different from those they were used to experiencing at Vietnamese high schools or universities.

Apparently, Vietnamese students have had both push/full factors suggested by Mazarol and Soutal (2002) to study TNE programs in Vietnam context. The data also indicates that some students enrolled in TNE programs were following the wishes or suggestions of their parents or their relatives. This is due to the fact that in general Vietnamese students grow up in a culture influenced by Confucian ideals - one that values education and respects family traditions and authority. Therefore, partly because of Asian cultural characteristics, specifically the Collectivism and large Power Distance, have influenced in students' decision of important events in students' lives (Hostede & Hostede, 2005). Further research needs to be done to explore this issue more deeply. This can be considered as a significant finding of this study in Vietnamese context.

Conclusion

This paper reports on why Vietnamese students choose to study transnationally for their undergraduate programs. It appears that getting a Western degree and improving English language competence are the two main reasons. This may result from the perception that transnational education programs are more prestigious and of better quality than those provided by the traditional local education system or the perception that Western professors in export Western universities are more experienced and have more knowledge of their disciplines. The distinctive finding of this study is the investigation of both pull and push factor reasons of Vietnamese learners towards TNE programs while previous studies (e.g. Akiba, 2008, Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Wallace & Dunn, 2013, Hoare, 2012) primarily found out only push-factor motives of other Asian students from Singapore, Malaysia and China.

It is important to note that there are some limitations to the study. For example, the survey respondents were limited to four disciplines at three northern Vietnamese universities. future research are suggested to explore students in more diverse universities with more disciplines in Vietnam in order to gain a greater understanding of why students choose transnational education programs over the ones offered by local institutions or universities. The paper highlights the need for incorporating more stakeholders of the TNE programs including both students' perspectives, educators and policy makers' perspectives in the provision of transnational education programs. Also, the further research on cultural differences between education exporters and importers of TNE programs should be studied much more in order to make necessary adjustment to motivate both learners and educators in these programs.

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